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ABSTRACT

Three dimensions of the relationship between children and their communities that have been identified are (1) children's sense of community as it develops from infancy through middle childhood, (2) characteristics of a competent community, and (3) the interaction between children's developmental growth and community resources. Children's sense of community changes as children increase their mobility, their independence and take on responsibility. Their understanding broadens to include a sense of boundaries, distance, and location, as well as spatial relationships of resources and organizations, demographic characteristics and group identity. Competent communities are characterized as those that accurately identify the needs of their citizenry and recognize the importance of the experience of mastery and effectiveness for their citizens. Competent communities can be identified by their efforts in three areas: health and safety, responsiveness, and the enhancement of human potential. Involvement in and use of the environment depends on one's conceptualization of self within the context of the community. The more one understands one's own talents, aspirations, and motives, the more one seeks resources in the community to enhance or complement those elements of personality. In the adult stage of generativity, ideas about one's own needs and goals converge with one's understanding of the social community and interact to guide actions taken on behalf of future generations. (Author/SS)

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THE CHILD AND THE COMMUNITY:

A DEVELOPMENTAL PERSPECTIVE

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The Child and the Community

There are many reasons to give careful attention to the community and its contribution to the development of children. The community is the primary setting where children spend unstructured time. The neighborhood, therefore, is a setting where children's experimentation, curiosity, and desires to experience competence will be openly expressed in interaction with naturally occurring social and physical phenomena. The neighborhood poses a variety of challenges that can potentially increase skills. Physical dimensions, a sense of space, territoriality, role relationships, and an appreciation of the sensory characteristics of the neighborhood are all elements of a sense of community. The neighborhood also provides resources, services, and opportunities for interaction that contribute to the child's physical, cognitive, and socioemotional development. The presentation today focuses on three dimensions of the relationship between children and communities:

1) A developmental analysis of a sense of community from infancy through middle childhood;
2) Characteristics of a "competent community"
3) The interaction between developmental growth and community resources.

The Development of a Concept of Neighborhood

At each phase of development a child's understanding of the neighborhood changes (Downs and Stea, 1973). These changes are a result of new patterns of

exploration and encounters in the neighborhood and a changing conceptual orientation toward space and distance. In infancy, the child's exploration of the neighborhood depends on his or her parents' pattern of movement. If children are carried on their mother's back or pushed in a carriage they may move quite far from home. On these outings they will experience the noises, the smells, and the visual patterns of their community. They may encounter other children and adults who briefly interact with them. In some communities, parks serve as a regular meeting place for mothers and babies. When these public settings are available, infants have opportunities to interact with age mates and explore in a relatively unrestricted area while their caregivers watch and visit with their own age mates.

Infants are responsive to novelty, to perceptual diversity, and to repeated encounters with familiar environmental events. They begin to recognize the sounds of their neighborhood like train whistles, car horns, or church bells. From within the house, certain neighborhood activities like the flow of traffic, the sound of children playing or the pattern of birds in flight can be observed and appreciated.

In toddlerhood, children have the capacity to explore their neighborhood more autonomously. The extent to which toddlers are permitted to wander depends on the safety of the neighborhood. When there is a lot of traffic on the street, parents are less likely to allow toddlers to play on the sidewalks. In neighborhoods where there is a safe outdoor space, toddlers may play with one another, walk to one another's house, ride tricycles, or pull wagons on their street.

Toddlers begin to recognize the boundaries of their neighborhood. They discover that they are not to walk on Mr. C's lawn or that they cannot play in the lobby of the building next door. "My house," "my yard," "my stoop,"

and "my sidewalk" become concepts that serve as ammunition in peer squabbles. Other important concepts about the community are less well understood. Toddlers do not have a reliable sense of distance. If they have made frequent trips to grandmother's house, they may think that grandmother lives nearer to them than she really does. A place that is two blocks away may seem a long way off if a toddler has to walk there. Since the proportions of most communities are designed with adults in mind, the physical size of the neighborhood appears big. One remembers long alleys, high fences, steep driveways, and scary heights from the top of the stairs to the sidewalk. Returning to these old neighborhood challenges, one discovers that the alleys, the fences, the driveways, and the stairs have all shrunk to a size that makes them convenient, but certainly not dangerous.

In the early school-age years, the school itself becomes integrated into a child's conception of the neighborhood. The child's cognitive map of the community includes a sense of the relationship between home and school. One might ask what children begin to learn about the neighborhood in the trips back and forth from home to school. Do children who walk to school discover different things about their environment than children who ride on a bus from home to school? How do these two experiences influence the child's emerging map of the space in which he or she lives?

Early-school-age children begin to expand their range of unsupervised movement through the neighborhood. They may visit a friend after school who lives several blocks from home. Through school, they begin to learn about neighborhood resources like the fire department, the police station, the radio station, the post office, or the ranger station. Children begin to appreciate that there are many people actively supplying resources so that their own lives are enhanced. The more extensively children are permitted to roam and

explore their neighborhood, the more accurately they can conceptualize the spatial relationships of their environment (Munroe and Munroe, 1971; Nerlove et al., 1971).

In the middle school years, a child's freedom of movement is even further expanded. Once children can read and make change, they can participate in much of the business of the neighborhood. They may be sent on errands to purchase groceries at the store. They may go to the movies or go bowling with friends. They may take the bus or the subway long distances from home to downtown, or from home to a museum or to a professional ball game. The neighborhood becomes conceptualized in terms of membership in community organizations. Scouting, 4-H clubs, boys and girls clubs of America, YM or YWCA groups, and organized sports activities are designed to expand the resources and skills of this age group.

Ladd (1970) asked black junior high school boys to draw a map of their neighborhood. The maps revealed a great deal of individual variability in the boys' strategies of representing their environments. Some boys tend to draw pictures of the buildings, the street, and the important landmarks on their street. Other boys drew symbolic maps representing the relationship of streets marked with significant landmarks (school, gas station, store). Age, grade level, and length of time in residence did not relate significantly to the kind of symbolism used in drawing the maps. Two boys who lived in the same housing project held very different ideas of their community. One boy drew just the buildings and parking lots in his development. For each child, the conceptual boundaries, the important landmarks, and the sense of space was represented differently.

Middle-school-age children begin to appreciate the demographic characteristic of their neighborhood. They can understand concepts like population

density, income level, educational background, or ethnic group. In terms of their own experiences they begin to have a sense of their community as others might see it--as"poor," "run down," "middle class," "segregated," "Irish," "rural," or "posh". These images feed into a child's growing sense of his or her personal identity. As children expand their movement through their own and other neighborhoods, they begin to get a sense of where they are from, a sense of their roots. The sentiments and the intensity of identification a child holds for a particular neighborhood or community may have long-term implications for the personal life goals of a child in the middle school years.

What Do We Expect of a Competent Community?

The concept of competence as it applies to a person refers to the ability to experience effectiveness in meeting challenges of daily life. We believe that there are levels of competence that reflect a person's stage of life. Nevertheless, we can apply the term to someone at any age who is able to achieve mastery by exercising skills and by accurately identifying environmental demands.

We would argue that one can also describe communities with regard to their competence. Competent communities accurately identify the needs of their citizenry. They show skill in anticipating needs as well as in responding effectively to emerging demands. Competent communities recognize the importance of experiences of mastery and effectiveness for their citizens. They design their settings and allocate resources in order to foster these goals.

The competent community can be identified by its efforts in three areas: Health and safety; Responsivenss; and Enhancing Human Potential. Here we will limit our examples of these areas to some that would have direct implications for children.

Health and Safety

The competent community is committed to maximizing safe exploration and participation by children. It anticipates hazards and intervenes to prevent injury. Examples of these interventions include traffic signs where children are at play; special road bumps to slow traffic; care about spraying insecticide where children play; or reducing the amount of lead dust or other pollutants produced by factories.

Communities provide information and resources to maintain health and safety. In addition to medical and dental resources, children need information about nutrition and fitness. Poison centers, information about how to cope with extremes of weather, or information about what to do when you are lost can all be seen as programs intended to help children feel safe and in control.

Competent communities also teach skills that will promote and maximize safe exploration. As an example, in our community the preschoolers can participate in Safety Town, a course designed to teach young children bicycle safety. Classes in first aid, cardiac resuscitation, swimming, or wilderness survival skills are all examples of experiences children can have that give them a greater sense of being in control of their lives.

Responsiveness

Competent communities recognize the different needs of children at different developmental levels. Rather than insisting on one mode for participation in the community, responsiveness is indicated by providing diverse settings and diverse programming. Examples of responsiveness might include a design of play area that is appropriate to the full age range of infants and toddlers as well as elementary school children. Baby pools near the adult swimming area, play spaces built near shopping or

business areas, or elevator buttons that someone who is three feet tall can reach all reflect a responsiveness to developmental needs of children.

Responsiveness means recognizing the constraints on children and families. Roving libraries, or roving exploration vans for preschool children introduce novelty into the lives of families that may be isolated. Providing babysitting during adult events like lectures, concerts, or theater might enrich the entire family. The idea of the medieval roving troubadours who roamed from one town to the next continues to have appeal. If we can't bring families to music, art, or ballet perhaps we can bring these things to families.

Responsiveness also means a recognition of diversity in family groupings, lifestyles, and resources. In a study in Woodlawn, an area of Chicago, Kellam, Ensminger and Turner (1977) identified 86 different family constellations including mother-father, mother-grandmother, mother-stepfather, aunt-other, grandmother-other and father-other configurations. The authors also report that in their assessment, the mother-grandmother configuration was almost as effective in fostering development and adjustment of first grade children as mother-father families. Mother-alone families were most likely to be associated with poor social adaptation of the children. As more and more families experience divorce and remarriage, our approach to the family group must be increasingly flexible. In families with large numbers of children, it is often an older sister who has direct responsibility for a young child. Many adolescent mothers give their own mothers primary responsibility for child care. Resources to families must be designed, packaged, and delivered in forms that are meaningful and appropriate to the diversity of families that exist in the community. Competent communities communicate the optimism that any

family configuration can work to enhance a child's development with the necessary blend of emotional commitment and material and educational resources.

Enhancing Human Potential

Competent communities do more than respond to emerging needs. They recognize the desire of people to change and grow. Because the community represents a group larger than the person, the family, or even the immediate neighborhood, its actions and commitments carry more impressive symbolic meaning. It also has access to a greater pool of resources than would be available to any single child or family alone. As such, communities have the potential to foster the creative, self-actualizing potential of children. They can draw children toward new views of their own potential through the availability of diverse experiences, settings, and interpersonal interactions. Communities can design settings that engage a child's imagination. They can provide museums, parks, woodlands, zoos, or mouments that invite exploration. The commitments communities make to preserving natural environments, to honoring cultural heroes, or to creating unusual sensory experiences with fountains, gardens, sculptures or architecture communicate values that children can incorporate.

Children are drawn to the unexpected, the dangerous, and the magic places of a community. Commonly, they create special play places in areas that adults might consider wastelands or eyesores. Ravines, abandoned buildings, railroad tracks, alleyways, and river beds can be transformed through a child's imagination into opportunities for high adventure or into private places for reflection and intimacy with a friend. Rather than creating and defining all space for children,

communities can inspire children to shape and define their own spaces. The competent community recognizes the importance of being malleable, of offering enough undefined, open-ended space that children can experience a sense of being builders of their own environment.

Person and Environment Interaction

Development can only be understood as a product of continuous interactions of individuals who can be characterized by their temperaments, talents, motives, and intelligence with environments that can be characterized by their physical properties, their cultural meaning, and the quality of interactions that are likely to occur there. Let us think of the child as the figure and the community as the ground. We can assume that sometimes the child has his or her attention focused on the self and inner experiences. At other times, the child's attention is focused on the environment and the special characteristics or demands or the setting. At every phase of development, adjustment will involve conceptualizing components of the environment and making responses that meet what one perceives to the environmental demands.

As the child casts his or her attention out to the environment, it is hard to know exactly what out of the total, complex array will be perceived or considered as relevant. When our son was five months old, he enjoyed being held at the window so he could watch the cars go by. When our daughter was about the same age, she seemed sensitive to the sounds of airplanes flying overhead. At twenty months, she knows the way to the small park that is within a short walk of our house. She tries to convince any unsuspecting person who comes to visit to take her for a walk so she can go there. She is also attracted by motorcycles. She can pick one out at a glance as we drive along the street. Whenever she

sees one parked at a parking lot she wanders over to check it out.

We do have a sense that contrast is an important factor in directing attention. As children scan their social environment, they begin to ask whether their experiences are shared by other children. Religious background, racial identity, family structure, handicap, or social class can all become a central, relevant dimension if you are the only one or one among a very few children who share your reality. Being a child of divorced parents is far less relevant if many children in the community share that reality. If you are the only child whose parents are divorced, then the community context highlights your difference.

Another factor that determines what of the environment is perceived as relevant is familiarity. A child who has never been to the lakefront, may not think of Chicago as a city with a highly developed shoreline for recreation. This child's understanding of the resources in a community will be linked almost directly to their repeated first-hand encounters with various settings. It is not enough to tell children about museums, parks and zoos. Unless they have opportunities to go there, these resources do not become incorporated into a psychological sense of community.

Finally, the child's attention to elements of the community will be directed by the affective tone that dominates the settings. Children will feel ready to identify with settings that are accepting of a child's behavior. Settings that are open, not excessively restrictive, and that communicate a value in being used by children will come to have a special meaning in contrast to settings that are highly critical, restrictive, and rather cold in response to children who enter. For this reason, for example, most children do not identify work settings as relevant elements

in a community. They are taught very early to associate banks, offices, department stores, or grocery stores as places where behaviors have to be restricted, where the attention of parents is likely to be diverted away from them, and where they are not encouraged to wander or explore. To the extent that we turn away children from these and other settings, we turn away the child-like qualities that adults might bring to them.

The conceptualization of self within the context of the community is an ongoing process. The more one understands of one's own talents, aspirations, and motives, the more one seeks resources in the community to enhance or complement those elements of personality. The more one encounters diverse resources and settings in the community, the more one comes to recognize and reconceptualize one's own self image. An understanding of self and an understanding of community are complementary elements in the total picture of social development. Perhaps the most critical expression of that reciprocal influence is in the achievement of generativity in adulthood. At that point, the convergence of ideas about one's own needs and goals and one's understanding about the structure and functions of the social community, interact to guide the actions one takes on behalf of future generations. One can begin to understand our enactment of the roles of parent, worker, and community citizen in light of how adults have evaluated and identified with the communities of which they have been a part.

Let us close with a quote from Gertrude Stein:

> "America is my county and Paris is my home town and it is as it has come to be. After all anybody is as their land and air is. Anybody is as the sky is low or high, the air heavy or clear and anybody is as there is wind or no wind

there. It is that which makes them and the arts they make and the work they do and the way they eat and the way they drink and the way they learn and everything.

And so I am an American and I have lived half my life in Paris, not the half that made me but the half in which I made what I made."

An American and France (1936)